

A Resolution for Recruitment and Retention

The recruitment and retention of volunteers can be difficult, regardless of the situation. For EMS and fire services, though, it can be extremely difficult to gather quality volunteers, for a number of reasons. It is no secret that the work EMS and fire personnel do can be dangerous, difficult, and draining. However, there are strategies that could be put in place in Wisconsin to maximize each town's ability to recruit and retain volunteers who will make a difference in their communities.

First, it should be noted that there are requirements that must be met in order for an individual to serve as an EMS or fire volunteer. As of July 13, 2016, the lowest level of training that would meet the requirements for fire personnel, known as "Fire Fighter 1", is the completion of two, 30-hour courses (*Staff Brief*). While there are further trainings that can be taken, this is the bare minimum for any public firefighter. Although 60 hours of training does not seem like much, these courses can be difficult to complete on the volunteer's end for many reasons. After talking with my father, who is a volunteer firefighter for the Town of Ellington, it has become clear that something should be changed in regards to how these training courses are offered. Often times it is difficult for anyone with a family or other commitments to complete these trainings, as they not only have to make it to the training, but have to work around their other job schedule, their family schedule, and have someone available to watch their children while they are gone. This can easily prevent someone, who was once interested in taking the courses, from completing them. If Wisconsin wants to recruit more volunteers, it is crucial that these trainings are offered at many different times throughout the day, at many different locations, and perhaps even via multiple platforms, such as a combination of in-person and online learning. If these courses are made more accessible to the general public and are appealing to all ages and backgrounds of individuals, it is likely that the participation rates will increase.

Furthermore, for an EMS volunteer, the training requirements are even more extensive, including continued education; EMS personnel are required to renew their licenses every two years and must complete, at a minimum, an 18 hour review course. For those with more advanced licensure, the review courses are longer, up to a total of 72 hours of additional training (*Staff Brief*). Once again, though this training is absolutely necessary, it can be a large undertaking for someone who is already living a busy lifestyle. In addition, becoming an EMS volunteer is an even larger commitment due to the required refresher courses and continuous

training that goes alongside the job. Unless these courses are made accessible at many different times, locations, and in differing ways, the number of volunteers being recruited will remain stagnant.

Obviously, course offerings cannot be changed simply with a flick of the wrist. In order to make these courses available, a lot of time, effort, and funds would be required. However, even if this is too large of an undertaking, offering something as simple as an incentive of some sort upon completion of training would push those interested to hopefully complete all necessary courses. For example, in November of 2019, the Prentice Volunteer Fire Department and Ambulance Service offered to pay training costs for volunteers (“Rural Wisconsin”). A monetary reward upon completion of training or free training such as this would likely push those with some interest to take the leap into becoming a trained volunteer. In addition, stronger advertisement of the courses and volunteer opportunities in general would greatly appeal to those unaware of the opportunity they have to serve.

However, recruitment is not nearly as important as retention, especially when it comes to EMS and fire volunteers. As mentioned earlier, many of those serving as volunteers have another job, a family, or perhaps other volunteer activities as well. All of this combined can make it difficult sometimes for volunteers to perform their jobs well. For these reasons, it is important for each department to have some sort of support system, not only for the volunteers, but also for their families. It can be difficult at times for the family members of volunteers, especially when calls are frequent and they are gone often. For that reason, it is imperative that each station or location makes sure that their volunteers know each other, are connected to each other, and can rely on each other; being able to find support in those going through the same thing is critical and can make the difference in whether or not a volunteer stays or goes. In addition, knowing those you work with and having a bond with them goes a long way in any career, but especially in one where danger is present, times can be tough, and the work is done from the heart.

Overall, it is no secret that there is a shortage of EMS and fire volunteers in the state of Wisconsin. However, there are ways we as a state and as individual towns can bring about change in this situation. The addition of more course opportunities for fire and EMS staff, as well as strong support systems within the community and team itself would greatly assist in the recruitment and retention of emergency volunteers.

Works Cited

“Rural Wisconsin EMS Agency in Need of Volunteers.” *Journal of Emergency Medical Services*, 11 Nov. 2019, <https://www.jems.com/2019/11/26/rural-wisconsin-ems-agency-in-need-of-volunteers/>. Accessed 28 May 2020.

Staff Brief: Volunteer Firefighter and Emergency Medical Technician Shortages. Wisconsin State Legislature, Wisconsin Joint Legislative Council, 13 July 2016. https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2016/1498/010_july_26_2016_meeting_9_30_a_m_legislative_council_large_conference_room/sb_2016_02_emt. Accessed 15 May 2020.